

# Agnomancy: Conjuring Ignorance, Sustaining Belief

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**Abstract:** *Recent years have seen an increased interest in the construction and exploitation of ignorance, with the establishment of a field of agnotology (ignorance studies). This effort has focused almost exclusively on governments and corporations, though little or none on religion. After exploring work in agnotology and introducing the concept of agnomancy (the creation or conjuring of ignorance), the present article offers a preliminary application of these perspectives to religion, investigating what light agnotology sheds on religion and when and for what reasons religion engages in agnomancy.*

**Keywords:** Agnomancy, Agnotology, Ignorance Studies, Religion, Religious Faith, Philosophy of Religion, Epistemology, Knowledge, Cognitive Faculties, Confirmation Bias

## Introduction

“Consequently, ‘will to truth’ does *not* mean ‘I do not want to let myself be deceived’ but—there is no alternative—‘I will not deceive, not even myself.’”<sup>1</sup>

Richard Swinburne characterized philosophy of religion as “an examination of the meaning and justification of religious beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> For that purpose and others, a subfield of philosophy of religion called religious epistemology was invented as “the study of how subjects’ religious beliefs can have, or fail to have, some form of positive epistemic status (such as knowledge, justification, warrant, and rationality) and whether they even need such status appropriate to their kind.”<sup>3</sup> Presumably then, professional philosophers, as well as lay believers (not to mention secular critics) would and should be centrally concerned with the truth of specific religious beliefs or

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201, [doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812088](https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812088); italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, “Religion, Problems of the Philosophy of” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 763, [doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001).

<sup>3</sup> Trent Dougherty and Chris Tweedt, “Religious Epistemology,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (2015): 547, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12185>.



entire religious systems. And an honest hearing on religion requires an objective assessment of those beliefs and a willingness to jettison them if they fail established epistemic tests of justification.

In an ideal world, such is how the pursuit of religious or any other kind of knowledge proceeds. However, we are all too familiar with the resistance to disconfirming evidence and argument, not only by the religious devotee but also the political partisan, the conspiracy theorist, or the holder of other dubious opinions and positions. A case in point is the Harvard-educated paleontologist and young-earth creationist, Kurt Wise, who confessed, “If all the evidence in the universe turned against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the analysis of knowledge and knowing must also deal with non-knowledge and non-knowing, not only as an absence of knowledge but as a refusal to know or to allow knowledge to sway one’s beliefs (i.e., Wise would and does persist in his creationist belief in full view of and in spite of—ironically and perversely, as we will see below, perhaps *because of*—his awareness with the facts against his belief).

Scholars have attended to, and educators have despaired over, the tenacity of beliefs and opinions in the face of nullifying facts or indeed even the fortification of such nullified positions. An emerging field of inquiry explicitly insists that we must augment the study of knowledge with the study of non-knowledge *as a productive and produced force* and not merely as a pre-epistemological vacuum. Curiously, writers on non-knowledge have not generally extended their investigation to religion; and unsurprisingly, religion scholars have not applied the concept and literature of non-knowledge to their subject matter. This essay will begin to fill that gap, surveying the research on non-knowledge and relating it to religion, considering how the processes of non-knowledge contribute to the survival of religion among ordinary believers and obstruct the candid adjudication of religious claims among scholars.

### **Agnotology: The Study of Non-Knowing**

In scholarly and popular thinking about knowledge, ignorance is too often construed simply as the epistemic state before the acquisition of knowledge: a person initially does not know, then encounters the facts and subsequently knows. From this perspective, any absence of knowledge—or even worse, any perseverance of false ideas and beliefs—is nothing more than

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<sup>4</sup> John F. Ashton, ed., *In Six Days: Why Fifty Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2000), 355.

a lack of acquaintance with the evidence. The very word “ignorance,” from the negation of the Latin *gnoscerere* (not just “to know” but “to be acquainted, recognize, perceive”) implies that the person who does not know is only one who has not yet perceived or become acquainted with the facts. Accordingly, exposure to the facts is assumed to fill the initial void of knowledge and, still more optimistically, to dispel false and now-falsified thoughts.

In this standard view, not-knowing is not only a default and transient state but also a passive one; surely we do not *try* to not-know. However, another variant of ignorance, the verb form “to ignore,” challenges the assumption of passivity. To ignore suggests and entails, at best, a lack of attention and, at worst, a deliberate (even motivated) disregard of and turning away from the facts—in some instances, a stubborn refusal to know or, like Kurt Wise, to follow new knowledge where it inexorably leads. This phenomenon is common enough that observers like Clark Chinn and William Brewer have asked how learners deal with “anomalous data,” that is, information that contradicts their already existing beliefs and conclusions.

Scrutinizing science learning in the classroom, Chinn and Brewer identified seven different and more or less active cognitive responses to data that do not conform to students’ prior understanding (what they call “theory A”). The student could “(a) *ignore* the anomalous data, (b) *reject* the data, (c) *exclude* the data from the domain of theory A, (d) hold the data in *abeyance*, (e) *reinterpret* the data while retaining theory A, (f) reinterpret the data and make *peripheral changes* to theory A, and (g) accept the data and *change* theory A, possibly in favor of theory B.”<sup>5</sup> Ignoring the new information means merely dismissing and forgetting it; rejecting the information means more consciously questioning and resisting it. Excluding the knowledge involves compartmentalizing the data away from prior ideas (e.g., perhaps regarding it as irrelevant), whereas holding it in abeyance involves postponing dealing with its consequences. In reinterpreting the data, the learner tames the menacing information, at the extreme subsuming it into their existing understanding and thus using it to *bolster* that understanding. If the anomalous data has an impact, it may alter minor aspects of prior belief, leaving core ideas and commitments unscathed. Only in one of the seven cases does the (desired) effect of replacing old thoughts with new information occur. Chinn and Brewer further noted that in five of the seven responses, there was at least some acceptance of the

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<sup>5</sup> Clark A. Chinn and William F. Brewer, “The Role of Anomalous Data in Knowledge Acquisition: A Theoretical Framework and Implications for Science Instruction,” *Review of Educational Research* 63, no. 1 (1993), 4, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543063001001>; italics in original.

data; and in four cases, an attempt to explain the data. Obviously, then, explanation and acceptance do not inevitably lead to belief change. Rather, “Instead of abandoning or modifying their preinstructional beliefs in the face of new, conflicting data, students often staunchly maintain the old ideas and reject or distort the new ideas.”<sup>6</sup>

Such observations call for a rethinking of our conceptions of knowledge and non-knowledge. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, James Frederick Ferrier urged that non-knowledge deserved the same attention as knowledge, and since the latter had a technical name (epistemology), he proposed a name for the study of non-knowledge or ignorance—agnoiology. The suggestion was not immediately embraced, and in fact it was almost a century-and-a-half before the more successful term “agnotology” was popularized by Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger.<sup>7</sup>

Two decades previously, Michael Smithson also launched a probe into ignorance. Warning that “ignorance and uncertainty were neglected topics in the human sciences and even in philosophy,” and that ignorance is often erroneously “treated as either the absence or the distortion of ‘true’ knowledge,” he constructed a taxonomy of ignorance, as depicted in Figure 1.<sup>8</sup>

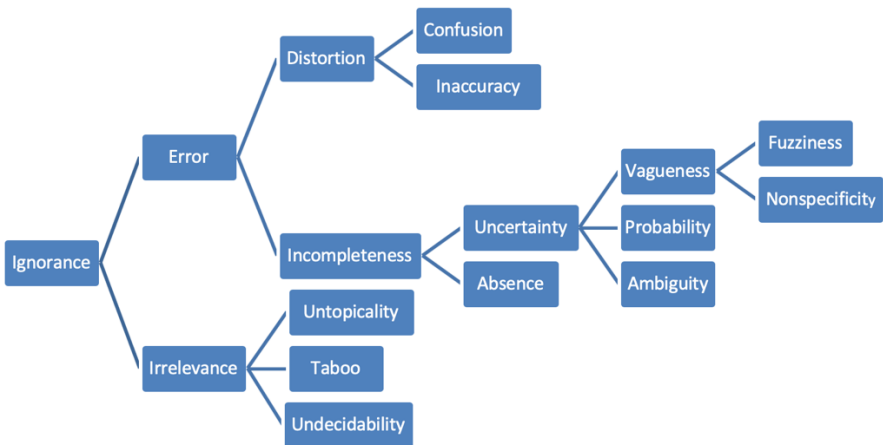


Figure 1: Smithson's Taxonomy of Ignorance

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<sup>6</sup> Chinn and Brewer, “The Role of Anomalous Data in Knowledge Acquisition,” 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Smithson, *Ignorance and Uncertainty: Emerging Paradigms* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989), 1.

Since that groundbreaking work, other analysts have added further examples of ignorance or ignorance-generating activities, such as known and unknown unknowns, denial, censorship, obfuscation, propaganda, and flat-out lies. In the introduction to their volume, Proctor named several “interesting surrogates and overlaps” for ignorance, including “secrecy, stupidity, apathy, censorship, disinformation, faith, and forgetfulness.”<sup>9</sup>

Forgetting is an especially important form of ignorance and, therefore, of belief persistence and change. In a serious way, learning new knowledge and adopting new beliefs equates to forgetting or “letting go of” old knowledge and belief (the etymology of “forget” actually connotes loosening the grip on and losing care for former thoughts and memories). Of course, some forgetting is natural over time, but Paul Connerton identified seven types of forgetting as cultural projects, including *repressive erasure*, in which some memory or fact is deliberately wiped out of existence (like revolutionary France’s wish to eradicate the very memory of the rebellious city of Lyon).<sup>10</sup> The diversity and cultural significance of forgetting has driven scholars like Liedeke Plate to advocate for “amnesiology” as a research field, which would certainly fall within the realm of agnotology.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the impression given here, not all ignorance is necessarily bad. Some ignorance, including some forgetting, is neutral and unavoidable. As many observers have noted, some ignorance is actually positive, like privacy and at least certain instances of secrecy. Indeed, Smithson granted that politeness often amounts to a kind of tactful non-knowledge characterized by indirectness, hedging, apologizing, and face-saving. And it is worth stressing that both scientific discovery and legal justice thrive in an environment of appropriate ignorance: science proceeds on the basis of *specified ignorance* or “known unknowns” as well as on the “double blind” experiment in which all participants are ignorant of some aspects of the test; and justice is ideally “blind” (literally portrayed wearing a blindfold) to facts that might undermine impartiality and fairness.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert N. Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), 59–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083889>.

<sup>11</sup> Liedeke Plate, “Amnesiology: Towards the Study of Cultural Oblivion,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016), 143–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750699915596016>.

### **Agnomancy: Conjuring Ignorance**

Many of the forces and variables that contribute to or create ignorance and, thus, often immunity to new information are innocent and spontaneous; but even when they are relatively innocuous, they can still be part of what Proctor recognized as *the cultural production of ignorance*. In more malicious hands, these and similar tricks can be tools and tactics of agnomancy (*a-gnosis-mancy*, no-knowledge-divination/magic/conjuring), the more or less premeditated, orchestrated, and strategic creation and perpetuation of non-knowing and false knowing. One of the areas of investigation for agnotology is or should be precisely such agnomancy, the weapons of which feature not only uncertainty and ambiguity but denial and suppression of information, counter-knowledge, framing, co-opting or corrupting language, conspiracy theory, conceptual/discursive (and sometimes literal physical) isolation, and the exploitation of cognitive biases.

The agents of agnomancy receiving the most attention since Proctor and Schiebinger's volume have been governments and corporations, and the arenas have concentrated on controversial scientific claims. In fact, chapters in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* discussed climate change, public health, sexuality, and abortion. Proctor and Schiebinger found themselves on the leading edge of a cascade of works such as David Michaels' 2008 *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*,<sup>12</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's 2010 *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth about Issues from Tobacco to Global Warming*,<sup>13</sup> and Philip Mirowski's 2013 *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*<sup>14</sup> (on the 2008 global economic crisis). This wave of treatises on deception and ignorance was anticipated by Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner's 2002 *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution*<sup>15</sup> and, more unexpectedly, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana's 2007 *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.<sup>16</sup> Continuing this investigative tradition, in her new *Industrial-Strength Denial: Eight*

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<sup>12</sup> David Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

*Stories of Corporations Defending the Indefensible, from the Slave Trade to Climate Change*, Barbara Freese chronicles a corporate history of denial, blame, complaint, counter-attack, rationalization, and sheer nonsense (e.g., that slave ships were fun places).<sup>17</sup> Surely there are many other tales of agnomancy to tell.

Sullivan and Tuana spoke for all of these writers, and many more, when they opined that “a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation.”<sup>18</sup> They also insisted that all knowledge and all knowers are situated in a specific time and place and that *the identities and interests of knowers and non-knowers are always relevant*. This is especially true when there are riches of money and power at stake, as most of these agnomancy studies depict. For Markowitz and Rosner, the particular culprit is companies that make lead-based paint and polyvinyl chloride for plastics; for Oreskes and Conway, it is a congeries of industries and interest groups engaged in misinformation about tobacco, pesticides, and environmental hazards like acid rain, global warming, and the depleted ozone layer. Michaels, focusing on health risks such as smoking and workplace toxins, blew the whistle on what he called “manufacturing uncertainty,” quoting a tobacco executive who stated directly, “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”<sup>19</sup>

Agnomancy in no way began in the twenty-first century; governments have been lying and propagandizing for as long as there have been governments, and merchants have always covered up their shady practices of using inferior materials, doing shoddy work, selling non-functional or dangerous products, and poisoning people and the environment with their noxious production and waste-disposal activities. Even such a champion of truth (of Truth) as Plato sang the virtues of untruth, according to Karl Popper:

It is one of the royal privileges of the sovereign to make full use of lies and deceit: “It is the business of the rulers of the city, if it is anybody’s, to tell lies, deceiving both its enemies and its own citizens for the benefit of the city, and no one else must touch this privilege....If the ruler catches

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Freese, *Industrial-Strength Denial: Eight Stories of Corporations Defending the Indefensible, from the Slave Trade to Climate Change* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Sullivan and Tuana, “Introduction,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product*, x.

anyone else in a lie ... then he will punish him for introducing a practice which injures and endangers the city.”<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Machiavelli counseled the prince to break his word whenever expedient through “shrewdness and cunning”; to Rafael Giralami he instructed that, “Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But let this happen in such a way that no one become aware of it; or, if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand to be produced immediately.”<sup>21</sup>

Lately, though, interested parties and their supporters have become increasingly skilled agnomancers, developing a kit of well-tested and skillfully (if not cynically) employed tactics. In short, the key to modern agnomancy is to erect barricades against potentially-disruptive information, to flood believers with misinformation and disinformation, and to sow confusion, doubt, and suspicion. Primary among these tactics is impugning any source of information that contradicts their claims and imperils their interests. For some decades, the main source of such information has been scientists and scientific research; increasingly, it is also investigative journalists. Agnomancers may argue, for instance, that there is no scientific consensus or that the science is incomplete. They may stress that scientists were wrong in the past, so how can we trust them now? They may exaggerate disagreement or inconclusiveness on small or tangential matters while conveniently overlooking the consensus on the main or fundamental matters. In the wake of the Trump presidency, they may question the quality or the very truth of facts (à la “fake news”) while accusing the bearers of those facts of bias (à la “the liberal media” or self-aggrandizing scientists). They may, for instance, condemn scientific findings as little more than opinion or majority rule (as if scientists vote on whether climate change is occurring!), equating scientific conclusions to any other opinion.

One crafty act of many modern agnomancers is to sponsor one’s own “research” by one’s own “experts” and circulate those results as what has come to be called “alternative facts.” Tobacco companies pursued this line of attack by paying scientists to determine that cigarette smoking was not harmful, indeed maybe even healthy. The point, of course, as Michaels reminded us, is that “the public is in no position to distinguish good science from bad. Create doubt, uncertainty, and confusion. Throw mud at the [real] research under the assumption that some of it is bound to stick. And buy time,

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945; repr., New York: Routledge, 2002), 150–51.

<sup>21</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 4 (Boston, MA: J. R. Osgood and Company, 1882), 422.

lots of time, in the bargain.”<sup>22</sup> On complex issues where ordinary folks cannot distinguish between valid information and propaganda, or on any issue where reasoning is highly motivated and driven by ideological or pecuniary commitments (for example, Holocaust denial, evolution denial, or climate-change denial), these “alternative facts” give the partisans a license to reject information that they dislike and to disbelieve further information that emanates from the same sources. And agnomancers of all stripes have learned that repeating a claim, including a false claim, over and over confers a kind of legitimacy, consciously or unconsciously exploiting cognitive biases like the confirmation bias (audiences selecting the data that supports their pre-existing beliefs) and the basic tendency to remember and believe things that we have heard many times (variously known as the availability cascade, the mere exposure effect, or most pointedly the illusory truth effect).

Further ploys used in agnomancy include establishing false equivalencies, for instance insisting that schools or media present “both sides” of “controversies” like evolution, climate change, or the Holocaust. Accomplished agnomancers also understand that strong emotion affects (and impedes) thinking, especially negative emotions such as anger and fear. Not entirely irrationally, anger toward a person or group and their ideas makes people close their ears and minds to them, and fear spawns boundary formation and defense and risk aversion. A wealth of studies illustrate that fear tends to inspire in-group solidarity, obedience to authority, and resistance to change or “support for the ‘way things are.’”<sup>23</sup> This effect is so concrete that asking experimental subjects to imagine that they have superpowers (thereby enhancing their invulnerability to risk and danger) renders them more open to change.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, it is no wonder that agnomancers frequently scream and threaten and scare, agitating their targets to close ranks and minds.

One prime way to slant an issue or argument in one’s favor is infiltrate and hijack the very language of debate. It is essential to appreciate that dominating and defining the terms of an argument is a crucial step toward winning the argument by default. Indeed, as agnomancers like consultant and Republican operative, Frank Luntz, fully comprehend, words themselves are little arguments, and the words we use influence our attitudes toward the

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<sup>22</sup> Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Jaime L. Napier, Julie Huang, Andrew J. Vonasch, and John A. Bargh, “Superheroes for Change: Physical Safety Promotes Socially (but not Economically) Progressive Attitudes among Conservatives,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 2 (2018), 188, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2315>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

topic. Accordingly, he infamously counseled Republicans to inject certain words into the discourse to slant public opinion their way. In his “14 Words Never to Use,” he wrote, “Sometimes it is not what you say that matters but what you don’t say. Other times a single word or phrase can undermine or destroy the credibility of a paragraph or entire presentation....So from today forward, YOU are the language police.” Among his recommendations was to call the estate tax a “death tax” because the majority of people favor the former but oppose the latter—although it is the same thing.<sup>25</sup> Other recent examples of words that act as hammers or fences for or against thought are “socialist,” “climate change” (instead of global warming), “welfare queen,” and of course “fake news” and “liberal media.”<sup>26</sup> Sometimes words are a coded call, dubbed “dog whistles,” to particular kinds of people like white nationalists. Linguist George Lakoff stressed the power of all such words in regard to “framing” an issue or debate. A frame is a way of seeing the world, which consequentially can determine what a person hears and believes: “People think in frames....[F]rames each force a certain logic. To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frames. If the facts do not fit the frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, evoking the frame and its terminology serves to strengthen the frame and make belief-change more difficult. The prophet of power language was of course another George, George Orwell, whose fictional authoritarians devised forms of speech—a Newspeak—that made some ideas easy to say and think and others hard or even impossible, guaranteeing sturdiness of existing beliefs. In 1984, he wrote, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past”—and he could or should have added that who controls the language is well on the way to controlling the present. Finally, agnomancers can just flat-out lie, as Plato and Machiavelli advised them to.

It is worth noting that agents and agendas of agnomancy need not be anything as centralized as a regime or a board room. Any constituency that is committed to hierarchy and to “identity-protective cognition” may be inclined

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<sup>25</sup> Frank Luntz, *The Frank Luntz Rethug Playbook, Unauthorized Edition: How to Scare the American Public into Voting Republican* (Luntz Research Companies), accessed February 22, 2020, <https://joshuahahnussell.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/luntzplaybook2006.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> This tactic was especially evident in popular country music songs after the attacks of September 11, 2001. For details, see David Kwon, “Imagined as us-American: Patriotic Music, Religion, and Violence Post-9/11,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 96–120, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.05>.

<sup>27</sup> George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004), 17.

to deny knowledge that jeopardizes its interests, and research indicates that, at least in the United States, “the most prominent denialists are conservative white males.”<sup>28</sup> Examining attitudes toward global warming specifically, McCright and Dunlap found that conservative white males were more than twice as likely as other Americans to discount global warming, and ironically (or not), these same men “are more confident in their knowledge of climate change than are other adults, even as their beliefs conflict with the scientific consensus”—(over)confidence compensating for, if not accounting for, their error.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, cognitive exertions to defend their status and to preserve the system in which they enjoy that status “lead them to reject information from out-groups (e.g., liberals and environmentalists) they see as threatening the economic system, and such tendencies provoke strong emotional and psychic investment, easily translating into (over)confidence in beliefs.”<sup>30</sup>

And believers of all sorts have their own natural defenses against contradictory knowledge, whether or not agnomancers are conjuring their resistance and ignorance. Cognitive biases of many sorts make processing or even receiving new information problematic, especially when the individual is under the influence of a group. And psychologists have observed all manner of clever and desperate reactions to the cognitive dissonance that arises from encountering anomalous and disconfirming knowledge. People generally want their thoughts and experiences to be consistent and comfortable, and if the discomfort of dissonance is not relieved by abandoning invalidated beliefs and attitudes, which Chinn and Brewer already noted often does not happen, then the enduring dissonance

can lead to misperception, misinterpretation, or misrecall of the information ..., rejection or refutation of the information ..., seeking support from those who agree with one’s belief or attitude ..., intensification of the original belief or attitude ..., or explaining the disconfirmation by adding new cognitions.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dan M. Kahan, Donald Braman, John Gastil Paul Slovic, and C. K. Mertz, “Culture and Identity-Protective Cognition: Explaining the White-Male Effect in Risk Perception,” *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 4, no. 3 (2007), 465–505, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-1461.2007.00097.x>.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, “Cool Dudes: The Denial of Climate Change among Conservative White males in the United States,” *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 4 (2011), 1167, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.06.003>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Eddie Harmon-Jones, “A Cognitive Dissonance Theory Perspective on the Role of Emotion in the Maintenance and Change of Beliefs and Attitudes,” in *Emotions and Beliefs: How*

In other words, in these and other ways, individuals conjure and perpetuate their own ignorance and non-knowledge.

### **Agnotology, Agnomancy, and Religion**

Presumably it has been noticed, with some astonishment, that religion has not attracted much if any attention from agnotologists. (Incredibly, a Google search in December 2019 for “agnomancy religion” yielded only fourteen hits, three of them mine!) Perhaps this is because most of them have concentrated on the agnomancy of corporations and governments; perhaps it is out of politeness, discretion, fear, or sincere belief. Nevertheless, as an institutional epistemological enterprise, religion is a field for agnomancy like any other human endeavor—more so because it trades in speculative and unproven or unprovable (and sometimes disproven) claims advanced as truths (even eternal truths). Indeed, the only person to use the term “agnomancy” before me, William Clough, referred explicitly to questioning, misrepresenting, or lying about knowledge “for social, political, economic, or *religious* purposes.”<sup>32</sup> Even he, though, did not pursue the religion issue. It is necessary and worthwhile, then, to train the agnotological lens on religion to learn what religion might reveal about ignorance and non-knowledge and to observe how religion commits agnomancy. This section of the essay, thus, represents a preliminary foray into an important but thorny subject.

Consequently, Judeo-Christian mythistory opens with a gesture of agnomancy—the proscription of knowledge (of good and evil) under penalty of death; at one time, when God spoke directly to humanity, he is depicted as castigating Job for daring to put questions to the divine. Elsewhere, the scriptures disparage knowledge, as in Ecclesiastes 1:18 (“in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain”) while insulting and threatening “the fool” who rejects the deity. The New Testament admonishes the believer to be a fool and a child and, again, demeans ordinary knowledge (“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight,” 1 Corinthians 3:19).

Early church fathers echoed and elaborated this theme, none more energetically than Tertullian (155–220 CE). In his *The Prescriptions Against the*

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*Feelings Influence Thoughts*, ed. N. H. Frijda, A. S. R. Manstead, and S. Bem (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 192, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511659904.008>.

<sup>32</sup> William R. Clough, “The Role of Agnomancy in the Creation and Perpetuation of Conflict,” in *Visions of Conflict: International Perspectives on Values and Enmity*, ed. Brian C. Alston (Lihue, HI: Brian C. Alston, 2010), 83, emphasis added.

*Heretics*, Tertullian infamously wrote, “After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe.”<sup>33</sup> He went on to pronounce:

My first principle is this. Christ laid down one definite system of truth which the world must believe without qualification, and which we must seek precisely in order to believe it when we find it....You must seek until you find, and when you find, you must believe. Then you have simply to keep what you have come to believe, since you also believe that there is nothing else to believe, and therefore nothing else to seek, once you have found and believed what he taught who bids you seek nothing beyond what he taught....I warn people not to seek for anything beyond what they believe, for that was all they needed to seek for.<sup>34</sup>

Most unequivocally, Tertullian concluded that the Rule of Faith (the Christian credo) “allows of no questions among us,” such that “it is better for you to *remain ignorant for fear that you come to know what you should not know*. For you do know what you should know.”<sup>35</sup>

Christianity persisted in subordinating reason to faith, knowledge to belief, in the work of Augustine (354–430) and beyond. Augustine (Sermon 43.7, 9) asserted that belief precedes knowledge when he declared “*Crede, ut intelligas*” (Believe in order that you may understand), even arguing that faith is a kind of knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Anselm (1033–1109) nearly quoted Augustine when he confessed *Credo, ut intelligam* (I believe in order that I might understand). But Augustine’s stance on knowledge and reason was much harsher. In his classic *Confessions* (chap. XXXV, 54), he denounced the “temptation of curiosity”:

For besides that concupiscence of the flesh which lieth in the gratification of all senses and pleasures, wherein its slaves who “are far from Thee perish,” there pertaineth to the soul, through the same senses of the body,

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Ed L. Miller, ed., *Classical Statements on Faith and Reason* (New York: Random House, 1970), 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Evan Fales, “Is Faith a Path to Knowledge?,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 182–205, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.08>.

a certain vain and curious longing, cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning.... This longing ... originates in an appetite for knowledge.

Later Protestant thinkers shared the same dim view of knowledge. Martin Luther (1483–1546) recognized reason as “God’s worst enemy”—“the devil’s bride,” which “faith must trample under foot.” “There is,” he opined, “on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason,” which “must be deluded, blinded, and destroyed.”<sup>37</sup>

Likewise for Luther’s contemporary, John Calvin (1509–1564), who taught that human reason had been “partly weakened and partly corrupted” by sin and that knowledge (of God at least, which was the only kind of knowledge that interested him) was “open only to him whose mind has been made new by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> “Thus we can see,” he judged, “that the reason of our mind, wherever it may turn, is miserably subject to vanity.”<sup>39</sup>

The trail of Christianity is strewn with examples of agnocracy, from the persecution of heresy (revealingly, from the Greek *hairesis*, “choice”) or heterodox religious knowledge-claims to the Catholic Church’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Forbidden Books) deemed too dangerous for the faithful to know (and incredibly only ceased in 1966). Not only were heretics often silenced permanently, but scientists and scholars were also suppressed or executed, like Galileo in the former category and Giordano Bruno in the latter. Blasphemy, or speaking ill or falsely about God, was likewise punished until recently, as evinced by the ironically-named 1649 Maryland Toleration Act, which vowed death for anyone so bold as to “deny that our Savior Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or shall deny that the holy Trinity is the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (which, parenthetically, some Protestant Christians and all Unitarians deny). Meanwhile, various Christian denominations declared their texts inerrant and their Pope infallible, foreclosing any epistemic options.

At the extreme, Christians have formed closed communities so that they do not have to deal with the ways and knowledge of non-believers or alter-believers. During its early decades, the Church of Latter-Day Saints moved further and further West to escape a hostile society, and the Amish maintain peaceful separatist communities inside America. Nancy

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1961), 75, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400866168>.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Miller, ed., *Classic Statements on Faith and Reason*, 75.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Ammerman's study of an American fundamentalist congregation emphasized how members attempted to cordon themselves off from the wider society and fulfill all of their practical, spiritual, and epistemic needs within the community. She pointedly observed that when such fundamentalists cannot dominate the institutions and official knowledge of the surrounding society, "they have responded by withdrawing to establish their own alternative institutions" and thus rested assured in their own sense of knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

In the most egregious instances, Christian initiatives subvert education and the institutions of education. One example is the "Good News Clubs" promoted by the Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF) and aimed at public school students under age twelve. According to Eric Cernyar, the curriculum of these clubs not only corrodes the self-esteem of youngsters, telling them that "they are 'deceitful,' 'dishonest,' and 'desperately wicked'" (in one classroom exercise "a teacher hangs a sign labeled 'SIN' around a child's neck"), but it impedes their reasoning by impressing upon them that the "worst sin of all is unbelief" and that "the sin of unbelief is manifested by doubting anything in the Bible." In no uncertain terms, children as young as five are warned to "ask God to protect your mind from wrong beliefs and to help you think about His Word instead."<sup>41</sup> Documented also in Katherine Stewart's investigation,<sup>42</sup> adults train grade-schoolers to proselytize their classmates with a message that assaults education "by attacking scientific evidence of origins, encouraging disrespect for the teachers who teach it, and actively intimidating children from critical thinking. Invidiously, the curriculum discourages students from becoming close friends with their nonbelieving classmates."<sup>43</sup> Stewart finds that the CEF would prefer to dismantle public education altogether and replace it with sectarian institutions.

The very concept of God—or we should say, of the Christian god and all gods alike—confounds our understanding and disappoints our expectations. It is not entirely possible to fathom a being as vast and foreign as a god, who remains inscrutable and mysterious. Worse, a deity does not always behave as we hope and anticipate: he/she/it does not answer our prayers, relieve our suffering, or appear in our time of need. It is not obvious if

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<sup>40</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 211.

<sup>41</sup> Eric W. Cernyar, *Protecting Public Elementary School Children from Emotional and Psychological Harm by Outside Groups* (Intrinsic Dignity, 2013), <http://www.intrinsicdignity.com/mfupmemo.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Katherine Stewart, *The Good News Club: The Religious Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Cernyar, "Protecting Public Elementary School Children," 2.

divinity is present, listening, responding—or even exists at all. This is an ancient problem, reaching back long before Christianity. Theognis, at least a century before Plato, expressed his dismay with the godhead:

Dear Zeus, you baffle me. You are king of all; the highest honor and greatest power are yours, you discern what goes on in each man's secret heart, and your lordship is supreme. Yet you make no distinction between the sinner and the good man, between the man who devotes himself to temperate and responsible acts and the man who commits deeds of hubris. Tell me, son of Cronus, how can you deal such unfairness?<sup>44</sup>

The Hebrew scriptures refer repeatedly to a hidden god and the anguish of the frustrated believer:

- (God speaking to Moses): “Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them” (Deuteronomy 31:17)
- “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isaiah 45:15)
- “Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and holdest me for thine enemy?” (Job 14:24)
- “Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1)
- “Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?” (Psalms 44:24)

Theologians, philosophers, apologists, prophets, and keen layfolk have conceived a plethora of agnotological solutions to what has been called the problem of “divine hiddenness” or the “hiddenness of God.” As implied in Deuteronomy above, a god may withdraw from human presence out of anger, as a punishment for unrighteousness or unbelief. Some writers have opined that a god may not want to curtail free will or compel belief by obvious demonstrations of power or may desire that followers undertake an arduous trek to faith. Some reckon that a god's hiddenness or absence leaves space for the cultivation of higher moral qualities such as courage, generosity, and altruism, while others simply stop at the assertion that the human mind is too feeble to grasp the supreme mind. Thus, god reveals himself as he sees fit.

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966), 29–30.

One strategy for grappling with the incomprehensibility, potentially the unknowability, of the Christian god is negative theology, which approaches divinity precisely in terms of what *cannot* be said or known of it. Unknowability may itself be an essential quality of the deity, Philo's "luminous darkness" of God. Augustine called him *aliud*, *aliud valde*—other, completely other. John Scotus Erigena (ninth century) explained: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is *not*, because He transcends being."<sup>45</sup> Or divinity may simply be beyond human language, all of our words failing to do it justice; the best we can do is to utter that God is *not* this or that (e.g., good, just, powerful, loving, etc.) because every formulation is insufficient. This view has been shared by other religions, and not only theisms, as seen in Taoism. Indeed, the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* teach, "Tao (the Way) that can be spoken of is not the constant Tao. The name that can be named is not a constant name." Thus, the best knowledge we can have of deity or ultimate reality is non-knowledge.

In relation to human knowledge, most specifically science, one common tactic has been to declare that God exists exactly where knowledge is missing. This "god of the gaps" seats deity in the spaces of ignorance but also, presumably unintentionally, consigns him/her/it to a diminishing domain; as the gaps of human knowledge shrink, so does the god. Particularly after the Holocaust, the torment of divine hiddenness became so acute that new answers were sought, including "death of God" theology. Dating back at least to Nietzsche's epochal announcement of God's death, theologians and scholars made lemonade out of the lemons of their god's silence, as in Thomas Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*: the old god, or at least the old concept of god, truly had died, making room for a god-after-god, a god-beyond-god.<sup>46</sup> For Paul Tillich, "god" became not a being but the ground of being. More recently, Richard Kearney coined a new term, anatheism, for god-after-god and "another way of returning to a God beyond or beneath the God that we thought we possessed," but whom has become not only impossible to know but to believe in. Shockingly for many disciples, and in sharp contradiction of millennia of dogma, the essence of anatheism is "the powerlessness of the divine." After two World Wars, after the Holocaust, after the utter failure of the universe to exhibit any justice or compassion, the one defensible conclusion for a theist is "that the only God worthy of belief" is a

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in William Indick, *The Digital God: How Technology Will Reshape Spirituality* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), 179.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966).

“nonsovereign, nonmetaphysical God” who is “vulnerable and powerless,” incapable of intervening in the world or of relieving misery or injustice.<sup>47</sup>

Christianity is hardly the only religion to indulge in agnocracy; other religions, depending on their specific doctrinal claims, confront or advance their own variations of ignorance. For instance, every religion, including but not limited to the Abrahamic monotheisms, must deal with some version of spiritual hiddenness, as gods and other spirits act unpredictably, capriciously, or not at all. Islam has a venerable tradition of explaining Allah’s hiddenness. The great Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) contested that unknowability and imperceivability were inherent in divinity. For Ibn ‘Arabi,

The being of the Essence is beyond being known, it is the most hidden secret (*aktam al-sirr*). As the absolutely absent being (*al-ghayb al-ghuyub*), no one can know God in Himself but Himself. No one can perceive the divine essence but God Himself. The Gnostics can perceive divine self-disclosure, which is His revelation, but they cannot perceive God Himself unless they become annihilated. The divine essence will never be found and cannot be sought.<sup>48</sup>

For other religions, it is simply a quality of spiritual beings that they are fickle or erratic. In many traditions, spirits are tricksters who cannot be depended on for consistency (or morality). The inconsistency of gods and spirits can actually be a boon: it certainly allows religion to manage the contingencies of supernatural inactivity or even malevolence, and it can provide a space for human freedom, as among the possessed women of Tamil Nadu, for whom “it is precisely the random and amoral character of capricious goddesses and demon deities” that explains some of the women’s misfortunes and excuses some of their misbehaviors.<sup>49</sup> Webb Keane went so far as to assert that the unique features of religious speech can be attributed largely to the fact that “the presence, engagement, and identity of spiritual participants in the speech event cannot always be presupposed or guaranteed.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Ebrahim Azadegan, “Ibn ‘Arabi on the Problem of Divine Hiddenness,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 53 (2013), 51.

<sup>49</sup> Kalpana Ram, *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 129, <https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824836306.001.0001>.

<sup>50</sup> Webb Keane, “Religious Language,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997), 50, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.47>.

In all religions, the management of knowledge is critical. Taboos on elements of knowledge (and other powerful items) are a standard trait of religions, as is controlled access to esoteric knowledge. In Australian Aboriginal societies, men and women are ideally kept ignorant of each other's secret-sacred knowledge; and in many if not all religions, priests, shamans, or other specialists possess knowledge that ordinary folks do not and may not. In some religions, apostasy—leaving the faith-community after receiving its knowledge—is a capital offense.

Ironically, the efficacy of religion sometimes, if not often, follows from its *not* being informative, *not* conveying knowledge. Stanley Tambiah observed that monks in a Thai Buddhist village sometimes chanted to a lay audience; these chants “are meant to be heard but paradoxically they are not understood by the majority of the congregation (nor by some of the monks themselves), because the sacred language is the dead Pali language”; in what Tambiah dubbed “the virtue of listening without understanding.” Thai laity were “emphatic that through listening to the chants the congregation gains merit, blessings, and protection”—but not knowledge.<sup>51</sup> The same sentiment would apply to most lay Catholics hearing the Latin mass. In the light of cross-cultural incomprehension of much religious speech and action, Frits Staal took the next step and declared that religious ritual in general is “meaningless” in the sense that it is not intended to transmit information in the first place but simply must be done.<sup>52</sup>

When religions crash against the rocks of empirical and scientific knowledge, they have demonstrated considerable and diverse agnomantic ingenuity. Benjamin Zeller described three approaches in the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and TELA (“Heaven’s Gate”) respectively. First, he noted that none of the three religious systems “took the position that religion innately conflicted with science.”<sup>53</sup> Rather, each experienced its own special “tension” with science, responding to that tension in its own way. Unification Church officials “stressed the compatibility of their own religious perspective with that of Western science” but “looked to *guide* science, to set boundaries and goals for

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<sup>51</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 195.

<sup>52</sup> Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1979), 2–22, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852779x00244>.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin E. Zeller, *Prophets and Prottons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 9, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814797204.001.0001>.

its research, and to help scientists focus on improving both human knowledge and human living standards”—in conformity, of course, with church teachings.<sup>54</sup> ISKCON (popularly known as Hare Krishnas) under the leadership of Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta went further, discarding Western science but not the “concept of science.” “Instead, they looked to the Hindu tradition for a replacement to that of the West,” and “members of the group rooted this science in ancient Indian texts rather than the norms and establishments of American science.”<sup>55</sup> TELAH (The Evolutionary Level Above Human) or “Heaven’s Gate,” notorious for the mass suicide of its members in California in 1997, did not oppose science. Indeed, it borrowed many terms and concepts from modern naturalistic science (including the “gods” being extraterrestrials), but sought “to *absorb* from science its foundation of naturalism and build upon it a religious edifice. This movement fundamentally embraced American technology and science, transforming it into a religious ideology.”<sup>56</sup>

These three unconventional religions have fashioned wily retorts to the inconvenience of knowledge that diverges from (if not debunks) their own claims. Most spokespersons for religions accept some share of burden for justifying their doctrines with argument and evidence, but the most brazen form of religious agnomaney is the very abdication of evidential responsibility. Alvin Plantinga’s “reformed epistemology,” a new approach to religious epistemology, advocates just that approach. Perhaps because all efforts to secure Christian belief on fact and logic have proven unsuccessful, Plantinga has insisted for years that Christianity requires no such foundation. Most bluntly in his *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga contended that belief in the existence of the Christian god is at least warranted, if not self-evidently true, because that belief is “properly basic.” Like all sensory perception, it needs no inferences or proof. Notwithstanding the naivety of his phenomenology (i.e., sensory perceptions are not perfectly self-evident and pre-theoretical, as established by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty decades ago), Plantinga described his project as “starting from an assumption of the truth of Christian belief and from that standpoint investigating its epistemology, asking whether and how such belief has warrant.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Zeller, *Prophets and Protons*, 7; italics in original.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid; italics in original.

<sup>57</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii–xiv, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>.

To appreciate the breath-taking circularity of Plantinga's case, we must understand that for him, the warrant of a belief "is intimately connected with *proper function*":

More fully, a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief.<sup>58</sup>

Specifically, Christian belief is warranted because the Christian god installed a cognitive faculty, a *sensus divinitatis* (sense of the divine), in the human mind; and if that mind works properly, it will generate true belief. *But since, of course, the existence of this god is the very point of contention, it cannot be argued rationally that this god designed and installed the machinery for true belief of this god.* Yet, the spectacular agnomancy of Plantinga's reasoning has not prevented the widespread celebration of his ideas among apologists and philosophers of religion.

Another figure, Richard Swinburne, at least acknowledged the demand for argument and evidence to support theistic belief, but he also took a shortcut to this belief via his "principle of credulity," the primitive and agnomantic claim (which he called "a principle of rationality")

that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems ... to a subject that  $x$  [in this case, the Christian god] is present (and has some characteristic), then probably  $x$  is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so....How things seem to be (in contingent respects), that is how we seem to perceive them, experience them, or remember them are good grounds for a belief about how things are or were.<sup>59</sup>

Elsewhere he reiterated his anti-Cartesian hubris, "Things are probably so as they seem to be," without wondering for whom and why his god seems to be.<sup>60</sup>

This takes us to one remaining empirical question for religion, namely, the presence of all of the other religions in the world, or the so-called "problem of religious diversity." For, if multiple religions with various and

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<sup>58</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (1979; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 295–6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199271672.001.0001>.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199243794.001.0001>.

incompatible “knowledge” of gods and other beings co-exist—and they obviously do co-exist—then this diversity potentially endangers any particular religion’s knowledge-claims. Plantinga, Swinburne, and others have waved away this empirical objection in numerous agnomantic ways. According to Julian Willard, Plantinga’s reformed epistemology and unproblematic properly basic Christian belief drives him to reason that he

does not have to concede, in the face of religious pluralism, that his belief appears to be unlikely to be true. Rather, he holds that it is apparent to him that those religious beliefs that conflict with [his Christian dogmas] are false, since they are the result of an obscured *sensus divinitatis* in their adherents. Only his own religious belief is truly in accord with our natural tendency to form religious beliefs, ... being caused by the *sensus divinitatis*, and those beliefs that conflict with this are due to corrupted noetic faculties.<sup>61</sup>

Never mind that followers of other religions could throw the same argument back at Plantinga. Willard rightfully notes that, on Plantinga’s account, “if a religious community is committed to the view that non-belief is due to deep noetic corruption, it cannot also embrace any intellectual attitude that regards (explicitly or implicitly) non-believers as on anything like an epistemic par with themselves in this matter.”<sup>62</sup> The arrogance of such agnomancy amounts to the suggestion: *we have knowledge and you, with your faulty cognitive processes, have no knowledge and are incapable of knowledge.*

Swinburne stands on the anti-epistemological same terrain: although he still accepts a burden of proof for his preferred religion, he proclaimed, as Amir Dastmalchian understands him, “given a positive argument for Christianity rival religions demand less detailed attention.”<sup>63</sup> Illegitimately applying Christianity as the standard by which to measure all religions, Swinburne wrote,

I do not need to make a detailed investigation if I can show that none of those religions even claim for themselves characteristics to be expected a

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<sup>61</sup> Julian Willard, “Plantinga’s Epistemology of Religious Belief and the Problem of Religious Diversity,” *Heythrop Journal* 44, no. 3 (2003), 277–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2265.00224>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>63</sup> Amir Dastmalchian, “The Epistemology of Religious Diversity in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 3 (2013): 299, [doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12007](https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12007).

priori of a true religion and claimed by Christianity, and that there is enough evidence that Christianity does have these characteristics. For then I will be in a position to argue that there are reasons adequate to show that the Christian religion is more likely to be true than they are.<sup>64</sup>

All of this notwithstanding, if “things are probably so as they seem to be” to a Christian, they should just as surely be as they seem to be to a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a subscriber to Greek, Egyptian, or Norse mythology.

William Alston addressed the problem of religious diversity in a different but equally self-satisfied way. For him, religious beliefs are created by “mystical perceptions” that are processed through culturally-established “doxastic practices.” But since perceptions of the supernatural (whatever that might be) vary, as do the doxastic practices across cultures, divergent beliefs are certain to emerge. No worries for Alston, who (in Dastmalchian’s words) reached the specious conclusion, “If there is no way to solve the challenge of religious diversity then the reasonable thing for a religious believer to do is to continue to believe in the reliability of his religious beliefs and not to abandon them.”<sup>65</sup> That is, for Alston, Swinburne, and Plantinga, no knowledge outside of their own religious certainties need trouble them. Wrote Alston, “Incompatible propositions can each be justified for different people if what they have to go on is suitably different,” leaving us no method and no obligation to adjudicate between discordant religious knowledge-claims.<sup>66</sup>

Lastly, the secularist/atheist critique pushes the agnotological analysis of religion to its logical end. Atheists are fundamentally evidentialists (it is difficult to imagine an anti-evidentialist atheist), and they judge the evidence for gods (and ordinarily for other supernatural beings, although atheism, strictly speaking, only refers to deities) entirely unconvincing. Most atheist treatises evaluate the standard arguments for gods (cosmological, ontological, teleological, etc.) and rightly indicate their failings. Plantinga and his acolytes may blithely discount the absence of evidence and the poverty of arguments for their god, but atheists consider this deficiency the most damning argument against the Christian god and other gods (so-called “negative atheism,” on the analogy of a legal negative defense, which pokes holes in the prosecution case without necessarily presenting a case of its own). In fact, most individual

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Swinburne, “Response to My Commentators,” *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002): 310–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412502006108>.

<sup>65</sup> Dastmalchian, “The Epistemology of Religious Diversity,” 302–3.

<sup>66</sup> William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 275, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471254>.

atheists hold the position associated with Carl Sagan that supernatural claims, being epistemically extraordinary, require not only evidence but extraordinary evidence, and more than a few echo the sentiment that assertions made without evidence can be rejected without evidence.

Nor do atheists dismiss the problem of religious diversity as cavalierly as Plantinga, Swinburne, and Alston. The existence of multiple religions, each with an equal chance of being true, reduces the likelihood of the truth of any one religion accordingly; if there were one thousand equally (im)plausible religions (and there are probably more), then each would have a 0.1% chance of truth and a 99.9% chance of falseness—not encouraging odds for a Pascalian wager (which is itself a perfect agnomantic invitation: no knowledge, no worries, just bet). Worse for religionists, devotees of other religions are often just as confident about their gods and spirits. Their religious experiences are just as “basic,” meaning that the strength of faith is a quality of the believer, not an indication of the veracity of the belief. Finally, the myriad of religions leads the informed atheist to the breakthrough insight that religions are part of the colorful pageantry of human imagination, cultural products, but not descriptions of reality.

Divine hiddenness has lately become a formal challenge to the existence of god(s), particularly in the work of J. L. Schellenberg.<sup>67</sup> Schellenberg used the very fact that nonbelievers exist to argue that an allegedly hidden god does not exist on the premise that a loving god should want his creatures to know him and would make an effort to be known. In a word, a loving god should not be an agnomancer, spawning doubt and ignorance. Such an argument is a sub-type of the general “problem of evil” (a god permitting or inflicting evil and suffering), which is often tallied as the strongest argument against god(s), although it only applies to supposedly all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful deities. Theists could escape the damage of evil, and of divine hiddenness, by granting that their god is not all-good, not all-powerful (i.e., cannot prevent suffering, like Kearney’s anatheistic god), or, most relevant to our discussion, not all-knowing and at least partially ignorant. Suggestively, the deity’s ignorance deflects some of the problem of human ignorance of the deity.

To add one more point, some critics of religion maintain that the utterances of religion convey precisely no knowledge. Most often attributed to logical positivists, the claim is that religious language is incoherent or meaningless or both. Regardless of the status of logical positivism today, the

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<sup>67</sup> J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

critique still stands and, as noted previously, continues to vex theologians and philosophers of religion. The problem of trying to characterize god(s) in words is the basis for negative theology. For instance, in his philosophical defense of atheism, Michael Martin posited that “when terms like ‘is loving,’ ‘is forgiving,’ and ‘brings about’ are applied to God, they seem to mean something very different from what they mean when they are applied to human beings.”<sup>68</sup> Even, or especially, the word “god” is a subject of confusion, vagueness, ambiguity, and incompleteness—many of the features of ignorance in Smithson’s taxonomy. When it comes to statements about a god, such as “God is a person without a body,” “God is three persons in one,” or “God had/became a human,” reflection on the statements shows that the sentences literally make no sense: we have no experience of a disembodied person, no understanding of a triune person, and no concept of a divine/human hybrid. The problem becomes fatal when we consider the terminology of other religions, like *karma* and *samsara* and *moksha* in Hinduism or *jukurrpa* and *kuruwarri* in Warlpiri (Australian Aboriginal) religion. Those are words that one does not and cannot say in Christianity, just as Christian terms do not and cannot apply in those other faiths. Religions suddenly appear to be language games, incommensurable to each other or untethered to objective reality.

In the end, a relentless atheist and agnotological critique of religion could posit that there is no such thing as “religious knowledge” whatsoever. There are things to know about religions, such as their history and their doctrines (and the controversies over those doctrines). One might know about the exploits of the ancient Greek gods or memorize the Bible or the Qur’an. One might know the current propositions and debates in theology. But none of that counts as “religious knowledge” because religious knowledge only meaningfully refers to *knowledge of religious beings and forces*, true statements that can be made about them. However, if we cannot even be reasonably sure that any of our religious statements are true—indeed, coherent and meaningful—and if there is a reasonable chance that the subjects of those statements, the religious forces and beings, do not exist in the first place, then we cannot possibly “know” anything about them, any more than we can “know” about leprechauns and unicorns. If so, religion is nothing but agnomancy.

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 40.

### **Conclusion:**

In his classic essay on religion as a cultural system, Clifford Geertz characterized religion as a society's sense of the "really real," seeing it as "formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" and "clothing these conceptions with ... an aura of factuality."<sup>69</sup> The "really real" implies factuality and thus knowledge, indeed knowledge of the highest kind; yet both formulation and clothed aura suggest quite the opposite, that is, not fact but manufacture. He further explained that the ascribed and heavily-defended reality of religion is "devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable" its purported truths that are otherwise vulnerable to "the discordant revelations of secular experience."<sup>70</sup>

Knowledge and ignorance are as old as humanity and surely as intertwined as knowledge and power was for Foucault; we should probably revise the Foucauldian perspective to include power/knowledge/ignorance. The knowledge/ignorance nexus is inescapable because humans are a cultural species, a species that can and must invent imaginary worlds and inhabit them. Although distributed throughout culture, ignorance (like knowledge) is most often cultivated and manipulated when power and wealth are at stake, as well as when hierarchy and identity-protective cognition are operative. Significantly, religion is one of the principal cultural systems in which power, wealth, hierarchy, and identity protection are joined and, therefore, where the knowledge/ignorance dynamic is crucial and overt.

It is incumbent upon agnotologists, then, to widen their focus to include religion and upon professional religious epistemologists and lay believers to confront the agnomancy that pervades (and arguably sustains) their various belief systems.

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<sup>69</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

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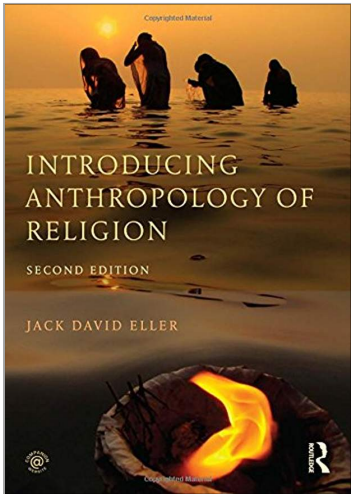
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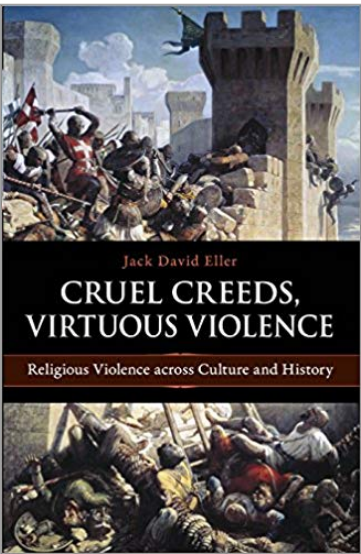
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